



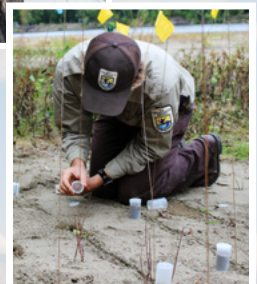
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge

*Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan
and Environmental Impact Statement*

December 2016

*Volume 1—Chapters 1 through 7
including Bibliography, Glossary, and Acronyms*



Front cover:

Connecticut River from Mount Sugarloaf

Lamar Gore

Insets:

Hunting on the refuge

USFWS

Conducting research on puritan tiger beetles

USFWS

Kayaking on the Connecticut River

USFWS

*Enjoying the universally accessible trail
on the refuge's Fort River Division,*

Massachusetts

USFWS

*Fishing along the Connecticut River
near Hartford, Connecticut*

USFWS



*This blue goose, designed by
J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become
the symbol of the National Wildlife
Refuge System.*

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of over 150 million acres including over 565 national wildlife refuges and thousands of waterfowl production areas. The Service also operates 70 national fish hatcheries and over 80 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, administers the Endangered Species Act, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance Program which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.

Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCPs) provide long-term guidance for management decisions on a refuge and set forth goals, objectives, and strategies needed to accomplish refuge purposes. CCPs also identify the Service's best estimate of future needs. These plans detail program levels that are sometimes substantially above current budget allocations and, as such, are primarily for Service strategic planning and program prioritization purposes. CCPs do not constitute a commitment for staffing increases, operational and maintenance increases, or funding for future land acquisition.



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge

Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement

December 2016

Final Vision Statement

The Connecticut River is treasured by all for its majesty and significance in supporting diverse aquatic and terrestrial plant and animal life along its winding 410-mile passage through urban and rural communities in New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. Working with our partners, we are inspired to protect and enhance the natural and cultural richness throughout the watershed, especially on lands and waters entrusted to our agency as the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge.

Together with our partners, we design, support, and implement strategic conservation actions across the watershed, and communicate conservation needs and successes through extensive outreach and education programs. On refuge lands, and in our conservation partnership areas, we offer visitor programs and activities that promote an appreciation of the Connecticut River watershed as an intact, interconnected, and healthy ecosystem. Visitors respond to this greater awareness by becoming active stewards of the watershed's natural and cultural resources. Through our Urban Partnership Program, we are promoting the relevancy of conservation to healthy communities. Our actions exemplify the Service's vital role in conserving the Connecticut River watershed and the refuge's important contribution to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge

Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement

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Summary

Type of Action: Administrative—Development of a Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Lead Agency: U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Location: Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge
Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont

Administrative Headquarters: Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge
Sunderland, MA

Responsible Official: Wendi Weber, Regional Director, Region 5

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Hadley, Massachusetts 01035
Email: northeastplanning@fws.gov

Alternative A—Current Management: This alternative represents continuing current management and serves as a baseline for comparing the other alternatives. Under this alternative, we would continue our current habitat and visitor services management activities on existing refuge lands. We would also continue to work with our existing partners throughout the Connecticut River watershed (watershed) to support our conservation, education, and recreation programs. We would continue to actively manage forest habitats on the Nulhegan Basin Division (Vermont) to benefit forest-dependent species of conservation concern, and manage grasslands and shrublands habitats on our Pondicherry (New Hampshire) and Fort River (Massachusetts) Divisions for species dependent on those habitats. We would maintain our hunting and fishing programs on refuge lands, which generally are managed consistent with respective State regulations. We would also continue to acquire lands from willing sellers under our existing approved land acquisition authority of approximately 97,830 acres. Our focus would continue to be on acquiring lands that were identified in the refuge's 1995 Master Plan and its accompanying EIS.

Alternative B—Consolidated Stewardship: This alternative would strategically focus our work with partners, and our staffing, funding, and other resource commitments across the watershed, in 16 defined geographic areas called Conservation Partnership Areas (CPAs). CPAs are large areas, defined by sub-watersheds, with concentrations of high-value habitat for fish and wildlife. Within CPAs, we have identified a total of 18 areas we call Conservation Focus

Areas (CFAs). These are areas with particularly high value to Federal trust resources and represent where we would focus our future refuge land acquisition. Under alternative B, we would not seek to expand the refuge beyond our current acreage authority. Instead, we propose to focus acquisition in CFAs rather than in the smaller, scattered areas proposed in the refuge's 1995 Master Plan and EIS. Under alternative B, we would expand our current wildlife habitat and visitor services management activities to other refuge divisions, and support those same opportunities within CPAs on other ownerships across the watershed.

Alternative C—Enhanced Conservation Connections and Partnerships

(Service's Preferred Alternative): Similar to alternative B, we would prioritize our work with partners in CPAs, and focus future refuge acquisitions in CFAs. However, under alternative C, we would seek to expand the refuge's approved acquisition authority in the watershed up to approximately 197,337 acres. The expanded network of 19 CPAs and 22 CFAs would allow for greater flexibility and opportunity for us to work with partners to achieve common conservation goals. We would be a more significant contributor to a well-connected conserved lands network in the watershed. Under alternative C, we would be able to increase our benefits to species of conservation concern by managing more acres of habitat with better distribution across the watershed. Expanding the refuge land base would also enhance our ability to address, and adapt our management to, climate change. We would be able to provide more public access for compatible recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, and photography. We would also expand our education and interpretive programs with an emphasis on engaging urban communities.

Alternative D—Conservation Connections Emphasizing Natural Processes:

Similar to alternative C, we would prioritize our work both on and off refuge lands in the same 19 CPAs, and would focus refuge acquisition in the same 22 CFAs. However, under alternative D, we would further expand individual CFAs and seek additional acquisition authority of up to approximately 231,307 acres. The increased acres would further enhance the refuge's capability to establish connections in the watershed's conserved lands network, and would strengthen our ability to adapt refuge lands to climate change. A major difference between alternatives C and D is that alternative D proposes to limit active habitat management. We would only intervene in natural processes when a federally listed species is in jeopardy, or a major wildfire or pest outbreak occurs and restoration is a critical need. Under alternative D, we would be able to provide more public access due to the increased land base, but our visitor services programs would emphasize a reduced human footprint, with a focus on backcountry opportunities and fewer developed areas.

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